

The Japu Of Guru Nanak

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THE Japu is the first text included in the *Guru Granth*. It is held by many scholars that the Japu contains the main thesis of the Sikh religion and that the rest of the *Guru Granth* is merely exegetic. This is the reason why a careful study of the Japu is necessary, before anything else, for those who would understand Sikhism and the Sikh movement.

Some modern readers, however, experience considerable difficulty in following the meaning and significance of such texts as the Japu for the reason that they are not well acquainted with the ancient spiritual traditions of India, while the Japu assumes such an acquaintance.

The Vedas, by common agreement, contain the most ancient religious and philosophical lore of mankind which has been the corner-stone of all religious and metaphysical thought of India during the last three or four millenia.

Gautam, the Buddha, when preaching his precepts twenty-five hundred years ago, declared, as the Dhammapada records, '*Esho dhammam sanātanam*'—“What I preach is the ancient Truth.” The ancient religious

lore of India is collectively called the Veda, and the Veda, therefore, is very old indeed. The ontological status of the Veda, according to the *Mīmāṃsā*, which is a Vedāṅga, a limb of the Veda, is that the Veda is God-inspired and eternal. What does this claim mean? The *Nyaya Sutra* of Gautam, the Rishi, which is another Vedāṅga, recognises four categories of epistemology, that is, the means whereby knowledge is obtainable: *Pratyakshya* (sense perception), *Anumān* (inference) *Upmān* (analogy) and *Sabd* (testimony).

Pratyakshya furnishes the material with which the physical sciences deal, while *Anumān* and *Upmān* do not independently furnish facts. They can only examine and analyse the facts furnished by the *Pratyakshya*.

The material of the *Sabd* are the regions inaccessible to the normal human senses, it being taken as demonstrable that such regions exist. The man who categorically denies the existence of such regions is a *Nāstika*—denier. With him there is no further argument in the ancient Indian philosophy. He is the *Manmukh* in the Sikh terminology—

the man who refuses to go beyond the normal human sense—perception, in contradistinction to the *Gurmukh* who accepts the *Sabd*, the testimony of the Guru.

The Veda, technically, is the *Sabd*, containing in verbal sounds, the facts pertaining to regions beyond the range of human sense—perception:

“Mysticism,” “numenon,” etc.—vaguely signify in the West the kind of knowledge which is the subject matter of the *Sabd*.

In India, the Veda, the repository of the *Sabd* has been commonly identified with the textual records known as the Rig Veda, the Sām Veda, the Atharva and the Yajur Veda. Also, the numerous *Ūpanisads* are also treated as the last chapter of the Veda and therefore it is called the Vedanta.

This Veda, that is, the Veda understood in this specific sense, has six limbs, six Vedangs, the knowledge of which is necessary for understanding this Veda. These limbs are prosody, grammar, etymology, Pronunciation, astrology and the ritual.

The facts given in the Veda are not perceived or formulated through human reason but are believed to have been revealed to men of extra-sensitivity—the Rishis—and therefore, the Veda is *Sruti*—revealed knowledge—as distinct from the

Smriti—knowledge derived through sense—perception and reasoning. The Veda is its own proof of its truth; it is what is technically called *svatahpramān*.

Gautam, the Buddha, twenty-five centuries ago repudiated the claim and validity of this Veda in its specific sense and he also denied the validity of the *Sabd* as a source of true knowledge. *Buddhi*, the disciplined and enlightened reason, was the source of all the truths that Gautam, the Buddha, preached.

As is recorded in the *Mahaparnibbansuṭṭanta* of the Pāli Dighnikaya, when Subhadra, the Brahmin philosopher, met the Buddha at the banks of the river Hirañyavati at the time when the Buddha was about to pass away, in answer to the questions as to whether there were any other truths beyond those mentioned in the Veda texts, the Buddha replied:

“This is not the time for such discussions. To true wisdom, there is only one way, the path laid down by me..... O. Subhadra, I do not speak to you of things I have not experienced. Since I was 29 years old, until now, I have striven after pure and perfect wisdom.....”

It is for this reason that Gautam, the Buddha, is described as a *Nāstak*—a denier, an heretic—in the Indian writings.

The disappearance of Buddhism from its native soil about fifteen hundred years ago is synchronous with the reassertion of the doctrine of *Sabḍ* and the identification of the *Sabḍ* with the Veda in its specific sense. This is the corpus of the ancient Sanskrit texts, the four Vedas and Upanisads.

It also includes the aphorisms called *Brahmsutras* of Badrayaṇ, the Rishi. All the mighty religious currents of Hindu thought of the middle ages originated from the interpretations of, and commentaries on, these *Brahmsutras* by such outstanding figures as Sankra, Ramānuja and Mādhava, the three great *Acharyas* of Hinduism.

These *Acharyas* are the founders of the great philosophical systems known as *Advait*, *Vasisht Advait* and *Dwait*. These philosophic systems became the foundation of the great Bhakti movement presided over by such mighty figures as Chaitanya, Tukārām, Jñaneswar, Tulsī and Kabir down to Vivekananda and Ramatīrath. It may truly be asserted that all these philosophical systems, the great Bhakti movement in all its nuances, the whole of this philosophico-religious thought and activity are based on logic and grammar, the *Bhashyas* of the *Brahmsutras*.

Two thousand years after Gautam,

the Buddha, Guru Nanak is a milestone in the philosophical and cultural life of India comparable in principle to the phenomena of the revelation of the Vedic texts and the formulation of the psychological discipline of Buddhism. Guru Nanak proclaims the validity of the doctrine of the *Sabḍ* with a certain modification and claims that the *Sabḍ* testimony which he adduces is independent of the ancient scriptural texts called the Veda, both in its genesis and validity.

Beyond that, he does not explicitly go. He does not repudiate the truths enshrined in this specific Veda, as Gautam the Buddha did.

Unlike Gautam, the Buddha, Guru Nanak does not repudiate the validity of the *Sabḍ* testimony. Like Gautam, the Buddha, he asserts that the springs of Truth have not dried up forever for mankind and denies that mortals may do no more than interpret, with the aid of logic and grammar, the truths stratified in the ancient texts.

With regard to the genesis of the *Sabḍ* testimony, the Guru asserts that human beings are capable, each one of us, of experiencing the truths of which he speaks provided he submits himself to a sustained rigorous physical and spiritual discipline and provided certain extra-terrestrial conditions, called the Powers of Grace,

are favourable to him. The last hymn of the Japu clearly enunciates this modified doctrine of *Sabd*.

This modified doctrine is of tremendous significance to the religious thought of India and, indeed, the whole of mankind. It preserves the transcendental character of Truth but substitutes the concept of a growing knowledge of this Truth within the ken of human minds. Its primary interest is centred around the problem of the quality of living.

This doctrine of Guru Nanak is of such a large philosophic nature that it would be difficult to conceive of any historical or philosophic discovery which would seriously affect it. The essential teaching of Guru Nanak, the essence of Sikhism, therefore, has nothing to fear from the two basic and revolutionary activities of the human mind, or, more precisely, the modern western mind, higher criticism and scientific investigation.

Higher criticism consists of the examination of previous ideas and their alleged authorities while scientific investigation examines all things dispassionately and objectively, assuming nothing and testing everything.

Guru Nanak bases his testimony on no previous authority and concedes the possibility of the truths that he

reveals being tested by human mind, provided certain experimental conditions are fulfilled.

The Japu has thirty-eight hymns or *Pauries* i.e. the stairs, containing a systematic and complete statement of the basic philosophy of Guru Nanak. All the hymns of the Japu are metrical, on the pattern of Rig Veda with a severity of expression and economy of words, making the stanzas related brothers of the ancient Sanskrit *Sutras*. This has made the Japu the most difficult of Guru Nanak's compositions to understand.

The line which forms the metrical unit consists of varying number of syllables and in each line the number of syllables is constant in all the hymns. The concluding lines of a hymn are often of a different syllabic length. The metres, like those of classical Sanskrit, have a quantitative rhythm in which long and short syllables almost alternate. The rhythm of the last four or five syllables is rigidly determined. In their structure, they come half-way between the metre of the Zend Avesta where the principle is the number of syllables only, and the classical Sanskrit in which the quantity of every single syllable is fixed in every line. 'The Epilogue, the last *Sloka*, however, is an exception to this rule.